

## **"Can drama, through Icelandic tales, increase children's vocabulary"?**

What can the medieval tales of *Egill saga* and the myth of *Idunn and the apples* teach children today?

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### **Abstract**

The article is based on a study, done by Ása Helga Ragnarsdóttir and Rannveig Björk Thorkelsdóttir in 2010-2011 where the authors explored the research question: Can drama, through Icelandic tales, increase children's vocabulary? Methodology of the study was quantitative approach (comparative research). Data was gathered through questionnaires and a word definition part of an Aston Index questionnaire. All the students in the eight groups, four classes in the research group (using drama) and four classes in the control group (not using drama) were asked questions from the stories the teachers were working with, one old Icelandic saga: *Egils saga* and one Nordic myth *Idunn and the apples*. The researchers created two drama programs from the stories which half of the teachers used. All the classes read those books at the same time. The findings of the study showed an increase in vocabulary between the surveys in all eight classes, the greatest increase was observed in the classes where drama was used.

### **Introduction**

Children's development as readers occurs as they engage in a variety of literacy experiences and through interaction with others, more experienced individuals. Many children can express their needs and wants through body language, but increasing their vocabulary will enhance their quality of life and create new opportunities for them as they develop communication skills. The challenge is to understand how children develop as literacy learners, and to create a curriculum that engages them in increasing and developing their vocabulary.

This article is based on a study “Can drama, through Icelandic tales, increase children’s vocabulary”? The authors wanted to find out if drama in education can enhance literacy development among children in second classes (seven year old children) in Primary schools in Iceland.

## **Create a language rich environment**

Children start school with a vocabulary, which has been learned mainly from contact with their parents and the literacy environment at home. Biemiller (2003) found that considerable variation was in the vocabulary amongst children aged seven. He also showed that vocabulary growth is largely determined by parental practices, particularly before the age of seven. With this knowledge it should be obvious that intensive interventions are needed early on focusing on enhancing children’s vocabulary. Having a small vocabulary can trap children in a vicious circle, since children who cannot read more advanced texts miss out on opportunities to extend their vocabulary (Fisher and Blachowicz, 2005). Thus, it is important to find ways to increase children’s vocabulary.

Vocabulary is a strong indicator of reading success. Becker (1977) points out that those children who have a lack of vocabulary knowledge have it mainly because of lack of learning opportunities but not as a lack of natural ability.

According to Duke and Moses (2003) reading stories to children and getting children to read themselves are the basics of vocabulary growth, together with engaging children in rich oral communication and encouraging reading and talking at home. Additionally they point out that the effectiveness of raising words consciousness is by playing with them through games, songs, drama and humour. At the same time they stress that children must encounter a word several times in different contexts before learning it. Fisher and Blachowicz (2005) address the teachers and recommend using a rich vocabulary when teaching and address vocabulary learning as a distinct subject in the curriculum and furthermore they advice selecting carefully appropriate words when planning teaching. Fisher and Blachowicz (2005) also recommend using stories when trying to increase student’s vocabulary. According to them reading stories in schools must be of a great value. Gudmundur B Kristmundsson is a senior lecturer in

Icelandic and language at the University of Iceland. Most of his research has been in field of literacy and the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Kristmundsson (2000) emphasize that if teachers use stories when raising vocabulary it is even more effective to put the children in the role of the persons in the stories. The children's experience and knowledge is important for the children's understanding of the text. In other words Kristmundsson recommend using roleplaying when increasing children's vocabulary. The research findings for "Creative learning through drama" (Ragnarsdóttir and Thorkelsdóttir, 2011) suggest that methods of drama are effective when working with students with learning difficulties.

This coincides with Cruz's (1995) ideas that students with academic difficulties can gain from learning through drama because the use of written text is not necessary and the methods are diverse. Bamford (2006) adds that drama in teaching offers students with reading difficulties different opportunities since books can be set aside. The findings also show that drama is useful when teaching students who have Icelandic as their second language. Students who take on different roles and characters use diverse language. Drama methods give immigrant children the courage to use the foreign language, which helps them improve their language use.

### **Story-based drama for increasing vocabulary**

Stories play a significant part in young children's life. Not only do they learn about the world around them through the stories but they also build up a foundation for their own future learning. Wray and Medwell (1991) claim that most of the new vocabulary children pick up in their school years is acquired through stories they read or listen to. Children, who read much and listen to a lot of stories, tend to have richer vocabularies than those that are not exposed to stories and read less (Stahls, 1998). It must then be recommended to engage students in motivational activities that encourage reading and improve children's vocabulary.

Storytelling and drama share similar features. When combining story and drama there is a discovery of the story, different than just reading or hearing the story read, a new learning. The children are "living through" the key events of the story by taking on roles to interact with others. They work collectively to make sense of the story and the process of working together allows them to see how persons think in a different way. The exploring of the story motivates the children to participate in an active discussion (Chang and Winston, 2012). The

children often have to persuade, dispute, argue and negotiate. After the story journey it is likely that they become interested in reading the printed text because their multi-sensory engagement with the story has laid the way for reading.

### **The learning area of drama**

Role-taking and role-creating in educational drama give students a chance to put themselves in other's shoes in an imagined context, which immediately brings the students to talk and communicate from a different point of view.

In drama class a fictional world is constructed by the student's, which gives them a sense of an ownership of the learning area and a motivation to contribute verbally in order to keep the drama going. In a well-designed drama situation, Somers (1994) argues, the learner's need for communication tends to overcome their fear of linguistic inadequacy so they are able to make the best use of the language skills they already possess and also learn from the different vocabularies of other students. Thus drama gives opportunities for pupils for developing their literacy.

Somers (1996) adds that when stories and tales are used as source for drama the students get an opportunity to feel empathy for him or her, which can broaden their vocabulary. They learn to be responsible in their own act, solve problems, and get a deeper understanding of the subject. For doing that, children have to use a variety of words, which can increase their vocabulary. Drama makes the literary world more accessible to the students and it permits them to turn abstract written words into concrete images and to construct meaning from the text through collective as well as individual experience (Chang, 2012). However the challenge for teachers here is to find suitable stories that motivate students to explore and use their vocabulary. Finally it is worth mentioning that it is important to reflect on the drama when it has come to an end. It is an effective way for all students to become actively involved in their own learning and at the same time it can increase their own vocabulary as a whole class's discussion always gives variety in language use.

### **Integration of different vocabulary through drama**

The drama tasks, when exploring the stories, provide a meaningful basis for developing the student's vocabulary. Different language skills are integrated throughout the drama subjects,

e.g. for the tableau in the drama session, first the students listen to the story, then they answer comprehension questions and learn a vocabulary that are new to them. When they work in groups, they discuss their answers and other questions they might have related to the story. They talk about what part of the story they want to focus on when role-playing and find appropriate language to use. Hence, the drama task allows the children to practice their vocabulary.

## **The Research**

The aim of the research was to explore if drama methods were useful to increase the vocabulary of young children in primary schools in Iceland. The research question was: Can drama increase children's vocabulary?

Bearing in mind that children love adventure the researcher tried to find subjects to use in the study that did appeal to children and had opportunities for them to participate in adventure. The researchers selected stories.

## **Background**

The present research project is related to the project "Creative learning through drama" carried out by the authors in 2007-2009. The authors looked into the place of drama in education in primary, secondary and upper secondary schools in Iceland. The main research question was: Can drama affect student's ability to learn? The findings of the study showed that drama is in general a powerful teaching method and particularly for students with learning disabilities and for immigrant students.

## **A roadmap**

The study "Can drama increase children's vocabulary" started by advertising for schools to take part in a comparative research project in autumn 2010. The research was planned to last one school year (9 month's), finishing in spring 2011. Teachers who were teaching children in second class (7 years old) were especially encouraged to take part. The only condition was

that for each school and each year class taking part, two classes should be involved. One class as a research group (using drama methods) but the other class not (control group).

Eight classes took part. Four classes using drama and four classes not. Both groups read the same two stories at the same time. The two stories selected were the medieval Icelandic *Saga of Egill* and the legend of *Idunn and the apples* from Nordic mythology. Two drama programs were created from the stories for the classes using drama. The drama programs were created in a way to facilitate the comparison of the research and the control groups. Those teachers who did not use drama could use any other teaching methods they chose. Before research began, a daylong training session for the participating teachers was held. The purpose of the workshop was to introduce the participants to the research study, provide them with teaching material and textbooks, and train them in the use of drama in teaching.

## **Research methods, data gathering and data analysis**

Methodology of the study was a quantitative approach (comparative research). Data was gathered through word definition questionnaires about vocabulary from the story *Saga of Egill* and test of word and phrases from *Idunn and the apples* both created by the researchers.

The word definition part of an Aston Index questionnaire were also used, but that part was carried out under the superintendence of expert in The Aston Index questionnaire. The Aston Index (Margaret J. Newton and Michael E. Thomas, 1976) is attended for pupils from 6-12 years old and is standard test in Iceland.

All the student's in the eight groups, four classes in the research group and four classes in the control group were asked questions from the stories the classes were working with. Two drama programs were created from the stories for the classes using drama. The first part of the questionnaire was answered in September 2010 before the project started and the second one in May 2011 after the completion of the project. The word definition parts of the Aston Index were tested at the same time. All the interviews where video- and audio recorded and confidentiality was ensured. The teachers that took part in the research did not see the survey and did not know what parts of the story's and what word's the children would be tested on. Each student was asked 26 questions from *Egils saga*, 15 questions from *Idunn and the apples*, and 26 standard questions from the word definition part of an Aston Index questionnaire in the beginning of the study and again in the end. A total of 828 pages of

written data were compiled from 138 children. One class did drop out of the research in January 2011 and in the may we tested 101 children. The data was analyzed quantitatively and compared. The questionnaires for each class was analysed by counting the right answers for each questions and average was found for each class individually taking into the account standard deviation before and after the project. The same methodology was used in September and in May.

A paired t-test was performed to determine that the findings was statistically significant. The project had a special focus on seven year old kids therefore most of the interviews took more time than was expected as the young children had difficulty in keeping their concentration during the whole questionnaire session. On the average the interviews took about half an hour. Each student was interviewed at the beginning and the end of the experiment and in total about 140 hours was used interviewing the students. None of the participating teachers in the focus groups had previously used drama in teaching for specific purposes. All the teachers were extremely interested in experimenting with the methods and believed it necessary to promote the use of drama in their schools. Researchers identify an outlier in the database. The outlier was not a calculation or recording error so the researchers decided not to eliminate the outlier from the research. Comparison of the results with and without the outlier showed no statistically difference. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have introduced four scales by which the quality of research can be measured. These markers are trustworthiness, dependability, transferability and conformability. Neutrality and objectivity are important in quantitative researches, with particular emphasis on the validity and reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Reliability is obtained by way of carrying out the same survey using the same participants, and in the hope for analogous answers; i.e. that repeated measurements lead to similar conclusions. In this research the scale that Lincoln and Guba posit is followed.

## **Findings**

Findings show an increase in vocabulary between the surveys in all eight classes. The findings also show the most increase happened in the classes where drama methods were used. Averages increase in the student responses, for example when working with the story of *Idunn and apples* through the method of drama was 4.95 correct answers versus 0.98 correct answers were drama was not used. The central tendency was 4.5.

The averages increase in *Egils saga* when drama was used was 4.68 versus 4.1 correct answers when the story was read and the central tendency was 4. In one class the story line method was used, in that class the averages increase in *Idunn and the apples* was 3.61 versus 3.44 correct answers with central tendency of 3.

In the table below (figure 1- 6) is a few random example of how the answers wear analysed. The first column shows the name of the story and the test of Aston Index, the second one the number of right answer in September 2010 (7 right answers of 26), the third one shows the number of right answers in May (12 right answers of 26), and the last column shows the increase between surveys. In Aston Index column the average (15.6) is shown in both surveys (in September and in May) minus the right answers (15.6 – 14). Student nr: 1 has answers 14 right answers in September and 15 right answers in May, that outcome is divided by the standard deviation to see if the answers has increase between survey and to find out if the student is under or over normal standard deviation in his or her age group.

### Random example of a student when drama is used

Student nr: 1	September 2010	May 2011	Increase between survey
<b>Egilssaga</b>	7/ 26	12/26	5 right answers
<b>Idunn</b>	7/15	10/15	3 right answers
<b>Aston Index</b>	14/26		15.6 (averages) -14.0 1.6/ 3.1 standard deviation The outcome is 0.51 under standard deviation but still in the normal one % of the standard deviation
15/26	15.6 (averages) -15.0 0.6/3.1 standard deviate on The outcome is 0.19 under standard deviation, with 0.32% increase between surveys.		

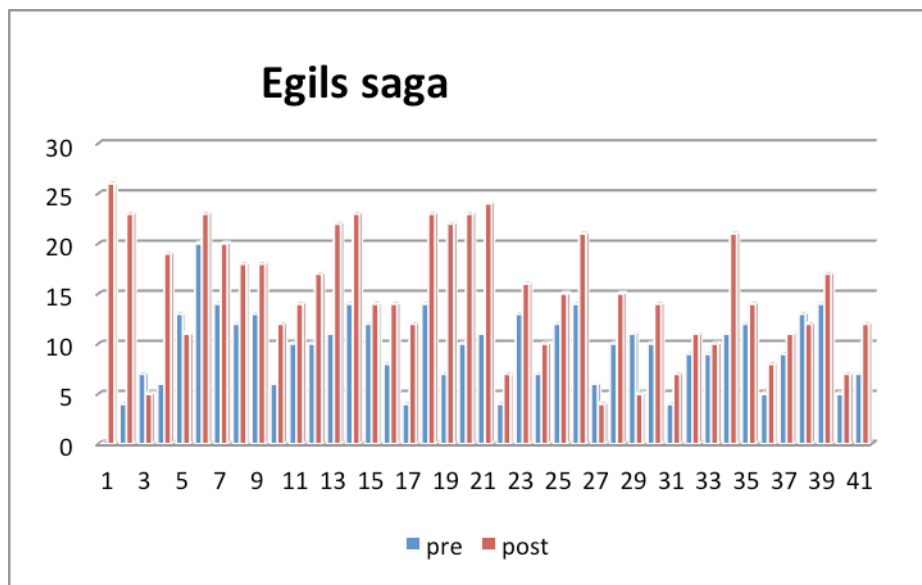


Figure nr. 1

Student nr: 2	September 2010	May 2011	Increase between survey
Egilssaga	14/ 26	20/26	6 right answers
Idunn	12/15	14/15	4 right answers
Aston Index	18/26		18.0
			15.6 (averages)
			2.4/ 3.1 standard deviation
			The outcome is 0.77 over standard deviation
20/26	20.0		
	15.6 (averages)		
	4.4/3.1 standard deviation		
	The outcome is 1.41 over standard deviation, with 0.64% increase between surveys.		

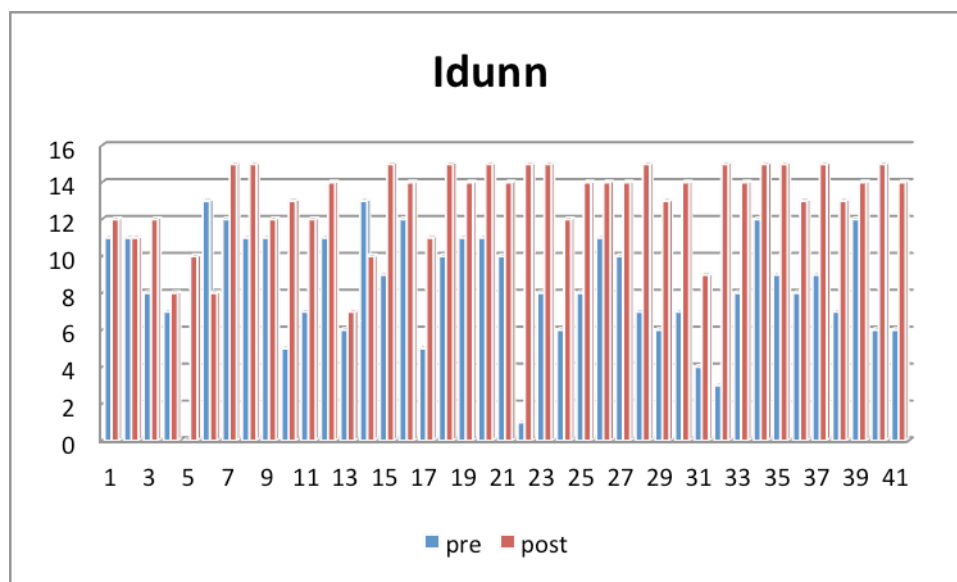
In figure nr. 2 the differend in answers are shown in pre (tested in September) and the post (tested in May) columns for the research group in Egils saga and in figur nr. 3 the differend in answers in pre and the post columns for the research group in Idunn and the apples.

Figure nr. 2



Egilssaga when teaching method is drama. The pre is in September and the post is in May.

Figure nr. 3



Idunn and the apples when drama is the teaching method. Pre is in September and post is in May

## Random example of a student not using drama

In figure nr. 4 student nr: 1 has answers 10 right answers in Aston Index in September and 15 right answers in May, that outcome is divided by the standard deviation to see if the answers has increase between surveys and to find out if the student is under or over normal standard deviation in his or her age group.

Figure nr. 4

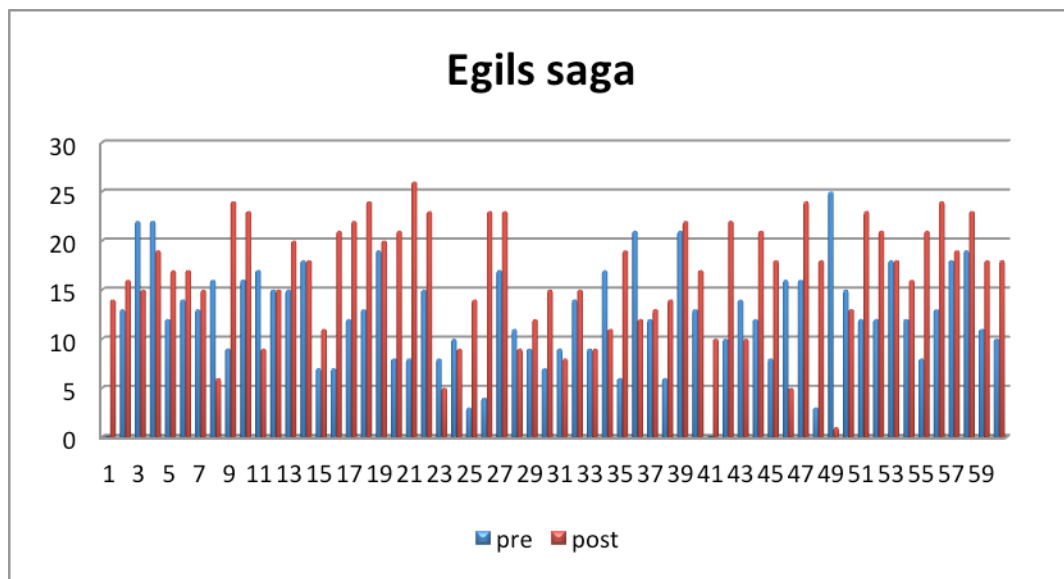
Student nr: 1	September 2010	May 2011	Increase between survey
Egilssaga	3/ 26	9/26	6 right answers
Idunn	7/15	10/15	3 right answers
Aston Index	10/26		15.6 (averages)  -10.0  5.6/ 3.1 standard deviation  The outcome is 1.80 under standard one % of the standard deviation
15/26	15.6 (averages)  -15.0  0.6/3.1 standard deviation  The outcome is 0.19 under standard deviation, with 1.61% increase between surveys.		

Student nr: 2	September 2010	May 2011	Increase between survey
<b>Egilssaga</b>	4/ 26	11/26	7 right answers
<b>Idunn</b>	6/15	11/15	5 right answers
<b>Aston Index</b>	10/26		15.6 (averages)

			-10.0 5.6/ 3.1 standard deviation The outcome is 1.80 under 1 % of the standard deviation
17/26	17.0 15.6 (averages) 1.4/3.1 standard deviation The outcome is 0.45 over standard deviation, with 1.35% increase between surveys.		

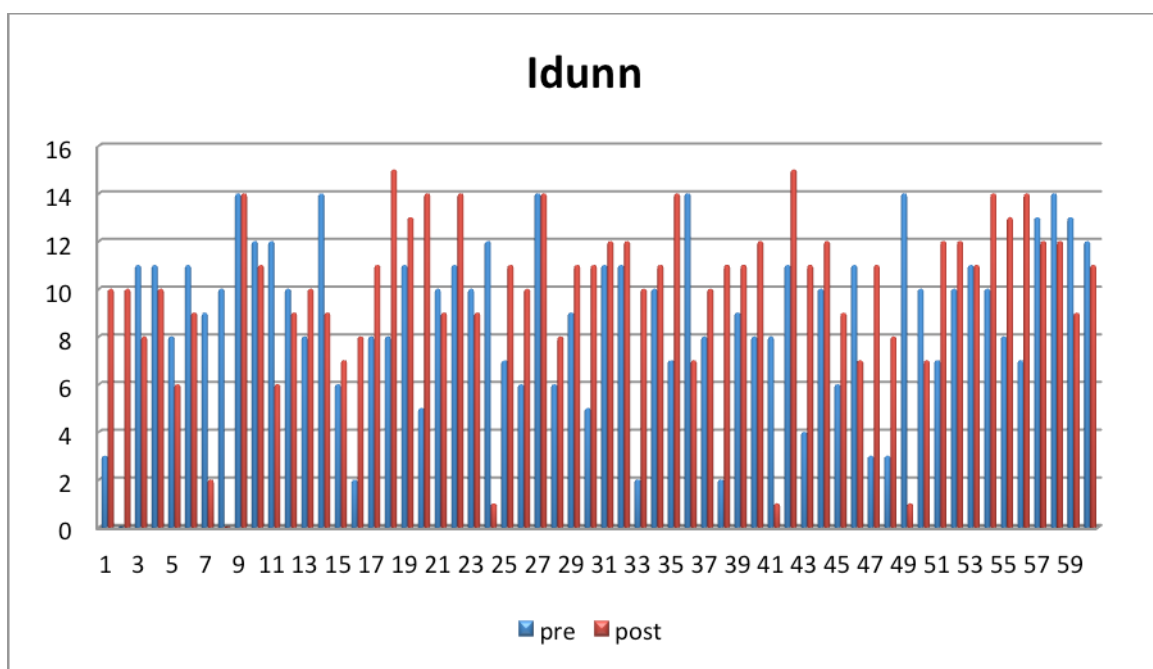
The findings for the word definitions part of the Aston Index, which is standard for the seven years old children in Iceland, shows that most of the students were in the average % of the standard deviation. If the distribution is normal, the target of 68% of students are within one standard deviation from the average and 95% of students are within two standard deviations from the average. In figure nr. 5 the differend in answers are shown in pre (tested in september) and the post (tested in May) columns for the control group in Egils saga and in figur nr. 6 the differend in answers in pre and the post columns for the control group in Idunn and the apples.

Figure nr. 5



Egilssaga when drama is not being used as a teaching method. Pre is in September and post is in May

Figure nr. 6



Idunn and the apples when drama is not being used. Pre is in September and post is in May.

The research findings suggest that when the stories are taught through drama, student's vocabulary increases. The students remember the story better. They take responsibility for their assumed characters and solve the character's problems based on their own real world experience. Textbooks are set aside and students get a chance to let their imagination and

creativity flourish. To find out if the findings are statistically significant a paired t-test was performed. When comparing means for *Egils saga* in September and in May the t-test shows that there was a significant differential between the tests.

### Descriptive Statistics

One-tailed distribution Critical value (5%)

Egils saga	N		Mean	SD	t
Control group	60	pre	12.33	5.38	0%
		post	16.48	5.84	
Research group	41	pre	9.53	3.91	0%
		post	15.12	6.04	

In summary with *Egils saga* the control group showed no significant gain in their vocabulary whilst the research group scores improved. Both groups were significant differential between the tests.

When comparing means for the *Idunn and the appel's* in September and in May the t-test shows that there was not a significant differential between the test in the control group according to the 5% (95% confidence level), but the research group shows significant statistics.

### Descriptive Statistics

One-tailed distribution Critical value (5%)

Idunn	N		Mean	SD	T
Control group	60	pre	8.33	3.48	6%
		post	9.86	3.49	
Research group	41	pre	8.34	3.13	0%
		post	13.04	2.31	

## Discussion

Findings show an increase in vocabulary between the surveys in all eight classes who took part, most of the increase happened in the classes where drama methods were used. It seems that when stories are taught through drama, student's vocabulary increases more than when conventional teaching methods are used. The drama-tasks provide a meaningful basis for increasing the student's vocabulary. It is similar to the findings of Ntelioglou (2012) that when students are roleplaying they focus more on their speaking as they often memorize and perform their own lines in front of the class. They choose the words according to the character they are playing and often come up with new words related to the character. In the story-drama they have to read the story carefully or listening to it, they have to make sure they understand the vocabulary, ask for the meaning of the words and add it to their bank of words.

Kristmundsson (2000) also stresses that when roleplaying children's experience and knowledge is important for the children's understanding of the text and can influence the growth of the vocabulary of the students. This coincides with the results of Podionzy (2000) on how language development increases when methods of drama are used in teaching. Students take on different roles and characters which call for diverse vocabulary use. Drama methods give the children with low vocabulary the courage to use the language, which helps them improve their vocabulary. Through drama, students get to choose roles they feel comfortable with, allowing them to build up experience.

They show interest in their characters and the roles they play give them a sense of security. Anderson (2012) mirrors those opinions by saying that in a sense when drama is used it is a

laboratory for choices. It allows those involved in the drama to try out ideas, to give them a „test drive“ before they „hit the highway“.

It seems that it can be of significance to use stories when increasing vocabulary. Our results suggest that even story-reading alone can increase the vocabulary of students. Similarly Duke and Moses (2003) found that reading to children and getting children to read themselves are the basic of vocabulary growth, together with engaging children in rich oral language and encouraging reading and talking at home. Furthermore they stress the effectiveness of raising words consciousness by playing with the words through games, songs, drama and humour. That is in harmony with other research (Wray and Medwell 1991, Somers 1996, Podionzy 2000, Duke and Moses 2003, Chang and Winston 2012) on the usefulness of using stories in increasing children's vocabulary.

With the use of stories and drama, many students can be drawn out of their silence into more active classroom participation and often they use a larger vocabulary in the drama session than normally, without realizing. Drama requires active participations from the children so it is crucial that every teacher encourage the children to collaborate and interact. In the drama lesson the students often used a tone of voice to indicate their feelings and attitudes when acting out the story and they seemed to enjoy it. They are unlikely, as Chang and Winston (2012) mention, to gain such learning experiences from reading the traditional textbook dialogues which are typically function-orientated and have little relation to the children's emotion and do not demand physical engagement. Most importantly, the story-based drama provides a variety of learning modalities to accommodate varying learner styles. It also enables students with different levels of vocabulary to co-operate and participate in the group work on equal basis.

Hargreaves (2003) argues that the school system is transforming into a knowledge society which does not emphasize creativity;

...instead of fostering creativity and ingenuity more and more school systems have become obsessed with imposing and micromanaging curriculum uniformity. In place of ambitious missions of compassion and community, schools and teachers have squeezed into the tunnel vision of test scores, achievement targets and league tables of accountability.

Instead of developing innovation, imagination and creativity, knowledge testing are prioritised. If Hargreave is right it must be important to foster creativity and innovation in schools. „The imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited.



Imagination encircles the world “ said Albert Einstein (Viereck 1929). Eisner (2002) stresses the importance of developing the child's imagination, thinking it is characteristic for their intellectual development. Similarly Vygotsky (1990) thinks that the development of the imagination influences children's maturity, behavior and understanding of the society and therefore it is important to foster the imagination and innovation of the students. When using stories and drama children's imagination flourishes as they have to create their own „world of imagination“ and when doing so they use a variety of vocabulary according to the persons they are playing. Literacy teaching must be about honouring each child's potential as a developing reader. Teachers have to engage the students in intensive and extensive literacy events as e.g. in drama, so that they can expand and refine both their ability to use their vocabulary more effectively, and their knowledge about how oral and written communication works (Booth, 2001).

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that vocabulary is important for a person to express herself and to communicate with others. The vocabulary is enormously important to children's development. Vocabulary can be taught purposefully. Teachers can have a real impact on children's vocabulary. For example by using a lot of stories and variety of different teaching methods to increase children's vocabulary. One of those teaching methods is definitely drama. The role that the students take on in the drama session encourages risk taking (because they are in the role of others) and often the students gain confidence in using difficult vocabulary in order to communicate spontaneously in the drama. It seems that drama has an important part to play in increasing children's vocabulary, but also to develop student's understanding of themselves and others, the text they are working with and the world in which they live in.

Drama and storytelling share similar features. When combining story and drama there is a discovery of the story, children are learning and discovering. Stories play a significant part in the lives of young children as they learn through stories about the world and most of the new vocabulary they learn in their school years is acquired through stories, so it must be recommended reading a lot of stories both at home and in schools and also that schools and homes work together in increasing children's vocabulary, by reading, talking and playing around the stories that have been chosen.

Words are powerful, let children enjoy them in the classroom, celebrate them, love them, have fun with them and embrace, thus children will most certainly be engaged in the learning process and at the same time increase their vocabulary.

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